

ARTICLE

“They Made Space for Me”: Enhancing Receptive Generosity in an Anglican Diocese in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Drawing on 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork with young Anglican social justice activists in Aotearoa New Zealand, this article engages with Romand Coles’s theory of receptive generosity, and the theme of the Western church as marginal, to explore why a particular Anglican diocese was attracting new, millennial-aged members, most of whom did not grow up Anglican. I consider how spaces of generous reciprocity were formed and enabled through living in intentional communities (ICs) and being able to engage with pluralistic “broad table” spaces of discussion and dissent. These factors were part of what drew the research participants to this diocese and to Anglicanism in general, as well as enhancing their social justice activism. My research shows the importance of intentionally making spaces of belonging for millennials and Gen Z aged people in a faith community, rather than hoping the status quo of the past will suffice.

Keywords: Anglicans, Intentional communities, Marginality, Social justice, Young adults

1 Introduction

In 2017 I began my PhD in Social Anthropology with the goal of trying to find out why a certain Anglican diocese (referred to as “Diocese J”) in Aotearoa New Zealand had many young people (‘millennials’) who were involved in social justice activism.¹ I wanted to find out what Anglicanism was contributing to their spiritual and activist formation. As an anthropologist and non-Anglican, theological concerns were not

1 A very short definition of social justice activism is activities which attempt to bring to public attention issues that impede people or groups having fair and equal opportunities to engage in the society they live in, or which hinder human, and increasingly non-human, rights (Plant 2001).

part of my research question; the main theoretical lenses were civil society, participatory democracy and phenomenological becoming. However, out of my fieldwork emerged themes and observations that should interest church practitioners and those at the coal face of Christian formation and discipleship.

One of the main observations why my participants were present in Diocese J was the opening of welcoming spaces for them and their interests. In the case of Diocese J, these spaces were initiated by the Bishop and the Deputy Bishop. These spaces were physical (in the form of intentional communities (ICs) where many participants lived) and institutional (through the creation of bridging mechanisms and paid roles which allowed for ecclesial innovation). Additionally, the Anglican praxis and theology of maintaining a “broad theological table” was found to be attractive to the research participants. I will analyse these spaces through the conceptual themes of receptive generosity and being marginal to argue that a cultural change is required by many Western churches to enable flourishing, life-giving and generous spaces of belonging for both their younger members and those who are outside their walls.

1.1 Methods

For this research project I used standard anthropological data gathering methods of interviewing (eight people), spending time with my participants through “hanging out” and going to events (church services, festivals, conferences, protest marches, meetings, workshops, training events), and examining written texts and materials. Participant selection focused on Anglican Christians in a particular diocese in Aotearoa New Zealand who were involved in either activist² or teaching activities which engaged with social justice issues (see the definition in footnote 1 above) and were aged between 22 and 35 years old, although there were some participants who ended up outside of this age range. Permission was needed from the diocesan bishops to proceed with the project, once this was obtained, I was able to start contacting potential participants and setting up fieldwork opportunities. Most of the fieldwork took place in a large city in New Zealand (not named due to ethics permission agreement with Diocese J).

One of my main goals for my fieldwork was to experience my participants’ world as much as possible, which led me to using a methodological framework called sensory ethnography. This method encourages researchers to move from detached observation to using their body and its senses as a way of understanding the multiple

2 Examples of activism activities undertaken by participants included public protests, blockading, gathering public submissions on government policy, awareness-raising events and sit-ins.

and varied “lifeworlds” (Jackson 2016) that their participants inhabit. Practically, this is done by co-creating and forming things together with one’s participants (Pink 2015). For example, instead of observing a teaching session, the researcher teaches in that session; instead of watching others pray, the researcher writes a prayer and prays it together with their participants. For myself, this method involved joining in some of the spiritual formation practices of my participants, such as morning and evening prayer, observing Lent and Advent, using the Anglican New Zealand Prayer Book (Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia 1989) for home devotions, and giving teaching sessions at some of my participants’ events.

2 Making space for Millennial Christians

The research questions I have engaged with throughout my graduate study come from trying to understand the contemporary issues that are important to, and formational in, the lives of young people who are Christians. The participants in my both my Masters and PhD research were usually millennials, that is, the generation born between the early to mid-1980s up to the end of the 1990s (Strauss and Howe 2000), although in my PhD project I also ended up with some Gen Z participants. Millennials grew up in an era where the Cold War had ended, and the world was becoming increasingly connected in cyberspace through digital technologies (Gregg 2017). Millennials in the West are one of the least Christian generations ever if adherence is measured by attending a church (Putnam and Campbell 2010; Ward 2013). While generally not interested in institutional Christianity, both millennials and Gen Zers are often interested in spirituality, mindfulness, meditation and yoga practices (Halafoff et al. 2020; Jian Lee 2018). Considering the characteristics of millennials discussed in the literature, it could be assumed that they would not be attracted to or want to be part of an old religious institution like Anglicanism. Yet Diocese J had a growing cohort of them, and this was a prominent reason why I chose to do my research there.

My research found that one of the reasons for the growth of millennial Anglicans in Diocese J was that space was made for new groups to be incorporated into the diocese at a pace and in a way that let them “try out” being Anglican. Most of these groups were based in emergent or neo-monastic Christianity. The Emerging Church Movement (ECM) has been called “one of the most important reframings of religion within Western Christianity in the last two decades” (Marti and Ganiel 2014: Abstract). The ECM has roots in evangelical Christianity and is primarily made up of “recovering evangelicals” (Bielo 2011; Cox Hall 2017). Most academics frame it as a rejection of evangelical right-wing fundamentalism and/or consumeristic “mega-church” Christianity (Bielo 2011; Marti and Ganiel 2014). The EMC began amongst

young evangelicals in the early 1990s in the US and other Anglophone countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand (Guest 2017). New Zealand had some of the earliest Emerging Churches, such as Cityside in Auckland (Taylor 2019). Marti and Ganiel's (2014) definitions of the ECM note an anti-institutional stance, the importance of ecumenicalism/pluralism, and a tendency towards experimentation and creativity. Gibbs and Bolger (2005) include being highly communal, and the importance of practising hospitality and egalitarian participation. Dissent and questioning are valued (Packard and Sanders 2013). Most participants in the ECM are millennials or younger Gen Xers (Cox Hall 2018; Moody and Reed 2017). These millennial-aged Christians "crave commitments that matter" (Spellers et al. 2010: 145) and "value authenticity in relationships and connection with culture" (Taylor 2019: 150).

Neo-monastics are a sub-group of the ECM (Carter 2012). They often live in intentional communities (ICs) and have a shared communitarian "rhythm of life" that structures each day and can include such activities as morning and evening prayer, practical work within the houses and out in local communities, and shared meals (Bielo 2011). Spiritual practices such as lighting candles, burning incense, contemplation, meditation, centring and liturgical prayer, silent retreats and observing the traditional church calendar are common in most neo-monastic communities (I. Adams and Mobsby 2010; Cox Hall 2018). Ethnographic studies have found that many previously independent neo-monastic communities and Emerging Churches, what Steve Taylor (2019) calls "first expressions" groups, have aligned themselves with mainline³ churches such as the Anglicans and Methodists. This was the case in my research also. Since "first expression" groups are already using contemplative practices and are attracted to the "old and ancient" (Bialecki and Bielo 2016), they find mainline churches a good theological fit (Snider 2011). In Anglicanism this process has been helped by the instigation of the Fresh Expressions initiative by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and based in the Church of England (Moynagh 2012; Taylor 2019). Many ECM/first expression leaders become Anglican clergy; Taylor goes so far as to call ECM/ first expression groups "vicar factories" (2019: 90).

2.1 Formational Spaces of Intentional Community

Intentional communities consist of groups of people who are not biologically related living together in a shared physical space such as a house/s or on communal land (Meijering et al. 2007; Miller 2010). At the time of my fieldwork (2018–mid 2019), there

3 Mainline – the traditional and established denominations of Christianity. Protestant mainline denominations include Anglican/Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, and Baptist. Some definitions include the Catholic Church, Quakers and the Reformed Church.

were four main ICs across the diocese consisting of 200+ individuals, with focuses on teenagers/youth, university students, marginalized people and members of a specific, youth-focused, church. Each IC usually consisted of a group of houses that formed one community. There were slightly different arrangements of space for each IC, and each had different demographics, consisting of combinations of single people, couples and families with children.

The context to this space creation in Diocese J was that its Bishop, John,⁴ was not a “cradle Anglican”. He had spent many years as the leader of a non-Anglican, ecumenical missional community movement. John eventually became Anglican and was ordained, and the intentional community movement he and his wife had founded became an Anglican order. When John became Bishop of Diocese J the practice of intentional community living, which already had a presence within the diocese, was resourced and encouraged even more, becoming an important part of its formational discipleship. Many of the leaders and members of who were part of the IC founded by John took on pivotal roles in the diocese. This in turn attracted other non-Anglican missional and emergent churches/movements and individuals to connect with Diocese J. Bishop John offered to formalize the relationship with some of these groups through the designation of being a “pioneer mission unit”, which is essentially a trial period for the group to “try out” being Anglican. Eventually several of these groups became official Anglican churches.

Many of my participants lived in one of the ICs and described how this way of living created a space to belong through “grounding and rooting” in a physical locality. Relationships and their formation and maintenance are one of the core values of neo-monastic living (Jones 2008). People joining these communities understand that they may not always get along with other members, and there will be tough times (Kamau 2002). However, they covenant to work out their differences because the community is envisioned as a family. Belonging was something that many who joined the Youth IC were looking for, according to its leaders Dan and Adele.

We were created to be in relationship, to belong, and society tells you ... the only thing you need to belong to is yourself. Community is the reflection of the spiritual truth that we are created to be relationship. One of our girls, she said “when I came here, I didn't really have friends and now I have family, and I have a safe place where I can come home every day and know I'm supported. I'm not alone and I'm not lonely”.

4 All names of research participants are pseudonyms.

Another IC leader, Pete, noted that the speed of change in contemporary society gave young people in their community anxiety about belonging and that lack of belonging amongst millennials had led to high rates of mental distress.

There seems to be a sense of constant conflict in the world at the moment and a lot to care about ... Choice anxiety is huge. Too many choices. What will I belong to? What will I give my energy to? ... we have an epidemic in mental health, my guess is that most of our people have some form of anxiety [and there are] a lot of mental health disorders that are manifesting in young adulthood.

The fast paced and chaotic temporality of the modern world was alleviated to some extent for my participants by the ICs that they lived in having a structured “rhythm of life” that was patterned on monastic life, albeit a life that included work and study outside of the community. Adele explained what a typical day would look like in their IC house.

We eat together, and we have a rhythm of prayer. We do prayers at [name] church twice a day, at 8.15 am and 5.15 pm. Everyone is expected to be there providing you don't have work or university lectures. We share our resources, and we serve in the local parishes. We think that is a core part of doing life together.

I noticed during my fieldwork that the times spent in ICs where prayer rhythms were used daily gave structure to everyday life. The combination of repetitive, ritualized spiritual practices with a structured and set daily routine was calming. It took some of the anxiety out of everyday life because there were fewer choices to have to make. In a chaotic world, stability can be a greater need than continual and unpredictable change. Anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1999) argued that structured communal rhythms are a form of “communitas” that binds groups together and repetitive everyday repetitions and tempos, such as the daily rhythms of life in the ICs, impacts and forms the self as well as the community. Anthropologist Amy Cox Hall (2018: 689) agrees, pointing to the daily patterned rhythms of life in neo-monastic communities which “fashioned selves and altered worlds”. These rhythms can also create what Heidegger referred to as “clearings” (Jackson 2013), spaces in everyday life which bring forth incremental changes of the self which can encourage transformation and a sense of belonging.

On a practical level living in an IC relieved some of the financial pressure that was common to millennials living in urban centres. This included not having to worry about rental precarity and being able to share resources such as food through communal meals. For families with children, living in an IC provided extra hands to

share childcare duties (Sargisson and Sargent 2017). All these aspects mentioned above freed up community members to spend more time on social activism and volunteer work. As Davina said,

It's not just living together but sort of finding your people, the ones you share values with. Particularly in your work having a community is grounding and I think that is necessary for activism ... that community is vital in keeping me going. Whether that is people that are going to be cheerleaders or people who say "yes I want to do this with you", and people who are going to call me out and say "maybe you should rethink that".

Thus, one of the main findings of my research was that providing structured spaces of belonging through the opportunity to live in an intentional community was an attractive option, and one of the factors why the research participants come to work in and be part of Diocese J.

2.2 The Pluralistic space of the Broad Table

Another factor that was appealing to my millennial participants was the pluralistic and "broad table" theological characteristics of Anglicanism. For political philosopher William Connolly pluralism is something that is created and maintained by the cultivation of specific attitudes and values; it requires living with tension in the in-between of multiple ideas, beliefs and ways of being; "it requires a tolerance of ambiguity" (Connolly 2005: 4). Anglicanism has historically had a "broad table" approach (Rayner 2003) to maintaining unity amid doctrinal or theological differences by allowing for a variety of opinions to be voiced and listened to in Anglican decision-making spaces (for example, the General Synod). At the broad table, allowances are made for "competing ideas and incompatible ontologies" (Adams 2018: 189), with all who lay claim to being Anglican allowed a "seat at the table". Rayner (2003: 59) points out that being able to balance and hold competing tensions for the sake of a wider unity is a feature of broad-church Anglicanism; "Anglicanism has traditionally been reluctant to excommunicate its radicals".

This openness extends to ecumenical and interfaith learning, with strong Anglican involvement in these types of networks (Randerson 2015). Anglican broadness affirms a wide range of people, practices and theologies, including types of social justice activism that some other Christian denominations reject. Anglicans in New Zealand have had significant participation in various interfaith groups (Hagggar 2017; Pratt 2016) and protest movements, such as the "Peace Squadron" in the 1970s led by vicar George Armstrong which attempted to stop an American nuclear submarine from entering Auckland harbour. These interfaith links have become espe-

cially important in New Zealand since the Christchurch Mosque attacks in 2019. This historical background of cultivating ecumenical and interfaith religious pluralism was evident in Diocese J.

It was noticeable during interviews that the acceptance proffered by the “broad table” nature of Anglicanism was something that had attracted many of my participants to the denomination. Pete said, “the Anglican Church has a broad table that beautiful and big, and you can be part of that ... a broad table which actually looks like the church [should]”. Stephen said, “there is a broad spectrum of practices, they allow for ... including activism in social justice. The dogma isn’t entrenched, there are opportunities to challenge, question, and think bigger ... they made space for me.”

Neo noted that the IC he had been part of was able to join the Anglicans because “it wasn’t questioned that we would be acceptable. Anglicans accept anyone, so of course, they accepted us”. For theologian Derek, Anglican broadness was important since it allowed for his background of training in a Lutheran seminary to be used and valued in an Anglican context: “I can say ‘this is how I do my theology’ ... and there is a place for me at the table. Really the goal of the table isn’t to bring everyone together to the centre but rather to honour everyone in the seats as they are.”

Another reason the broad table concept most likely appealed to my participants was due to being millennials. Research on millennials has shown them to be more accepting of pluralism and diversity than Baby Boomers or Gen X (Brunell 2013; Reysen and Katzarska-Miller 2013). Millennials are particularly prone to reject institutions who are not pluralistic and promote only one way of being: “some are resentful or afraid of a body [the Church] they perceive as unwilling to enter into dialogue and are still interested in stridently asserting its own version of the facts about the universe and the true interpretation of these facts” (Dormor et al. 2003: 2).

While many of my participants were just discovering the delights of Anglican pluralism, they had been disconcerted to discover fellow Anglicans who were trying to block access to the table. Some Anglican churches who oppose LGBTQ+ rights and/or the ordination of women in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have split off from their geographic dioceses and come under the authority of conservative bishops from places like Uganda and Rwanda (Hasset 2007). However, within Diocese J, the broad table is still in use and attracting those who are leaving Christian groups which have become fearful of pluralism and “outsiders”.

3 Discussion Theme One – Receptive Generosity

I want to suggest that the ability to sustain a local politics ... requires an orientation ... that grounds humility – the humility necessary to engage in the slow and painful work of sustaining a community capable of resisting the allure of significance that is the breeding ground of violence. (Coles and Hauerwas 2008: 24)

In considering how space was made in Diocese J to incorporate non-Anglican millennials, I have engaged with the work of political philosopher Romand Coles and his work on receptive generosity. According to Coles (1997), receptive generosity is a stance or orientation that is open to both giving and receiving from others, especially those that may have a different view. It involves encountering, listening, and vulnerability. Coles frames this through the term “Caritas”, which refers to the love of God for humans, and vice versa. Caritas is giving that is reciprocal. A generosity that only wants to give, but not receive, can lead to the establishment of unequal power structures and is not true generosity. Coles gives the example of Spanish conquistadors who, like some of the British colonizers who came to New Zealand, tried to “gift” Christianity to the indigenous people of the New World but did not see anything in indigenous religions that was worthy for them to learn from: “when generosity becomes separated from receptivity it tends toward imperialism and theft” (Coles 1997: vii).

For Coles, Christians can have problems with receptive generosity, especially receiving wisdom or input from groups who are “outside the Christian story” (Coles 1997: 3). However, he argues that there is a theological argument for extending receptive generosity to “the other” because that is what Jesus did: “since Jesus [was] a stranger, this must mean sitting receptively and generously at the tables of those of other traditions when invited” (Coles and Hauerwas 2008: 227). Coles notes that theology which claims God cannot receive anything worthwhile from humans, especially non-Christians, is problematic for creating authentic open spaces, especially if those outside Christianity are perceived as having nothing beneficial which can be given to God or his church: “the church construes itself as the foot-washer, but not in need of being foot-washed by non-Christians ... as server but not in need of being served by others” (Coles and Hauerwas 2008: 228).

It can be argued that the ICs and broad table theology created spaces that enabled Diocese J to be a receptively generous ecclesia, and this factor increased the amount of young people joining it and the incidents of activism taking place. The historical openness to “the other” brought into being spaces of transformation and “new things”, such as the uptick in social justice activism I observed. Romand Coles’s writing, and his conversations with Stanley Hauerwas, on the concept of receptive

generosity is a framework to work with as to how creating broad tables can (in)form ecclesial weavings and spiritual formation in a climate shocked, uncertain, twenty-first century world.

The table can be seen as a space of receptive generosity that encouraged listening and the giving and receiving of gifts from each other, rather than “non-relational charity”. This stance in Diocese J had subsequently increased the alliances and relationships with non-Anglicans on social justice issues of mutual interest, and attracted young Christians who are interested in fighting inequality and poverty. On a local and daily level, receptive generosity was practised and enacted in the intentional communities. Here receptive generosity intersected with several theological ideas, including immanence and incarnation – God with us. To be receptively generous was to intentionally embody and incarnate God’s vision of human flourishing by being a good neighbour through acts of service and being in relationship with those who lived close, to “wash feet” as Coles says. Being receptively generous in Diocese J was to envision the local as a sacred space where God dwelled.

4 Discussion Theme Two - Marginality and Liminality

During my research, I observed concerted efforts by my participants to construct spaces and tables at which to listen to each other, and those outside of their community. I contend that one of the aspects which encouraged listening in Diocese J was the decline in numbers and societal influence experienced by Anglicans in New Zealand and across the western world. The decline of people identifying as Christian in New Zealand has been particularly notable amongst mainline denominations such as the Anglicans, especially since the end of the 1960s, but applies to Christianity in general (Ward 2013). Census figures from 2018 indicate that more New Zealanders now identify as being “of no religion” than Christian (Losing Our Religion 2019). More and more Christians in Western nation-states view themselves as being marginalized and pushed to the edges of secular society (Rivera et al. 2023). Pentecostal Christians in particular feel that their beliefs and views on such issues as LGBTQ+ rights and abortion are not considered valid by those in power and society in general (Noble 2014).

Most Anglican literature refers to numerical decline as the major concern for the twenty first century (Dormor et al. 2003; Towle 2007). Paradoxically, Anglicanism is still the largest Christian denomination according to New Zealand’s census data; however, identifying as Anglican in the census generally does not segue into church attendance. Anglicans are also demographically older than Pentecostal leaning

Christian denominations, as research participant Erin said: “Anglicans are aging and shrinking in numbers and resources ... the average age is in the 70s and 80s.”

Marginality encompassed several meanings for my participants. When describing why they wanted to live in an intentional community (IC), one of reasons was that to live in an IC was to “live on the edge” (Kamau 2002) as an alternative to ‘the empire’. Cox Hall (2017: 695) says religious ICs “are experiments in living through liminality”. “Empire” refers to the societal structures which favour the powerful who oppress the poor and leave the downtrodden to fend for themselves (Claiborne 2006; Wilson-Hartgrove 2008), and are often specifically linked to neo-liberal capitalism. To live in an IC was seen to undermine this unjust empire. My participant, Stephen, viewed “empire” as something to be opposed: “the church is not meant to cooperate with the empire, we are called to subvert it”.

Some of the ICs were in suburbs that were impoverished, marginalized and somewhat chaotic. IC members were interested in building relationships with people in their local area who were from marginalized groups. To be marginal was also to be countercultural. Pete mused in his interview that living in an IC made one’s faith deeper and the call to challenge empire stronger: “there is something about being on the edge that makes prophetic voices sharper”. Neo had a similar observation: “identifying with the margins is being precarious, it can draw you a lot closer to Jesus”. Being marginal was also applied to the activist groups and causes the participants were part of. Stephen was frequently involved in protest marches and blockading events, he said “Jesus was very much outside of the camp. He was on the edges. I found myself leaning more towards people who were on the fringes.”

Being marginal seemed to be a conflicted subject for Anglicans in Diocese J. My mainly millennial participants Dan, Adele, Pete, Davina and Neo all thought that it was a challenge to stay marginal and “on the edge” whilst being part of an institutional entity such as the Anglican Church, which they said tended to draw one away from the edges of society and into the “centre”. Dan said, “to be honest this is probably the most ‘centre’ thing we have ever done”, while Davina reflected that “it can be a real challenge to try to get somewhere now that we are at the centre”. However, they also pointed out that Anglicanism was now marginal in New Zealand society overall.

In contrast, the sense I got from many of the older Anglicans I encountered was that they thought the Anglican Church in New Zealand still had considerable political and civic leverage and influence. Neo reflected that “the Anglican voice presumes [it] ought to be shaping societal arrangements”. Despite this stance, in general there is

a growing awareness of becoming marginal in New Zealand society which, I would argue, has opened spaces for change and transformation in some dioceses that would not have been entertained when Anglicanism was at its height of influence. Coles and Hauerwas (2008) point out that part of learning to listen requires being vulnerable and many Anglicans I met were certainly feeling vulnerable as they stared down a tunnel of future oblivion for many of their churches. Becoming vulnerable seems to have facilitated more efforts at listening to outside groups, which resulted in these groups eventually joining Diocese J and bringing with them listening skills gained from being marginal neo-monastic/emerging Christians.

5 Final reflection

The presence of the ICs and the Anglican concept of the broad table in Diocese J suggest that the incorporation of Emergent and neo-monastic groups has helped to enlarge and create spaces for encounter, messiness and taking risks which has attracted younger, previously non-Anglican people to the Diocese. These new Anglicans are aware that in the public square they are one voice among many and have brought with them an awareness of “Christianity as marginal” that older Anglicans hadn’t quite caught onto. Becoming marginal seems to have made some in Diocese J receptive to these new groups who bring with them energetic young people who are curious about ancient Christianity and the historical “treasures” of Anglican tradition and spiritual practices.

My research participants had learnt the negotiation skills needed to continually keep open engagement with the “other”, whether that is secular social justice colleagues or Anglicans who see themselves as the centre of society and not at the margins. The emphasis on marginality inherent in the ECM and neo-monastic groups, and now being experienced by Anglicans, can be linked to my participants’ identification with living on the edge. It can be surmised that identifying with marginality has led Diocese J to a more overt emphasis on missionally “being with” rather than only “providing for” the poor and needy. Thus, becoming marginal has changed the way that this group of Anglicans listened to and engaged with others.

It should be acknowledged that in opening space for people like my millennial-aged, non-Anglican background participants, there were those who felt that their more traditional Anglicanism had been sidelined and starved of resources. Thus, when space is opened for the new, it is a delicate balance to include and incorporate what already occupies that space. This is the time then to consider Coles’s ideas on being receptively generous to all who hold and value spaces in which they, and others, can come and flourish together. Then it can honestly be said, “they have made space for me”.

About the author

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